Vol 3
no 3

Unitarian Horizons

NOVEMBER 15, 1939

ONE GESTURE IN A LIFE TIME

THE Unitarian Society in Plainfield, New Jersey, recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and in connection with that occasion Mr. Charles A. Selden wrote a most delightful brief history of the church. As an example of the way in which salty humor may be combined with accurate chronicling of events in the history of a

parish and with genuine appreciation of spiritual values, I should like to commend this little booklet to all future church historians. It is a model that will be worth studying but extremely difficult to imitate.

Without permission, but with grateful acknowledgment, I should like to quote half a paragraph. "There are some aged men in American public life today who proudly call themselves liberals. They base their claims on the fact that in 1884, five years before the founding of this church, they supported Grover Cleveland on the Civil Service Reform issue or that, even more recently, they favored woman suffrage. Their theory is that once a liberal always a liberal and that only one gesture in a life time is needed to win and hold that status. There are some church organizations like that in the Unitarian as well as in other denominations. To use an old-fashioned religious expression they are back sliders into stagnation. This church has managed its first half century without back sliding."

A PROUD BOAST—BUT JUSTIFIED

I THINK anyone who knows the Plainfield church will gladly admit that Mr. Selden's assertion is warranted by the facts; and there are, fortunately, many others of the same sort. But the peril of back sliding into stagnation is not

something to be taken lightly by anyone who has the temerity to assume the liberal name. I like Mr. Selden's use of the word "manage" in his last sentence. The best we can hope for is that we shall somehow "manage" not to back slide, and the word implies both constant vigilance and alert ingenuity to avoid the danger. The spirit of liberalism is easily frightened away, and its departure may be so quiet that it is unnoticed by those most concerned. All that is necessary sometimes is a very short nap—"a little folding of the hands in sleep"—and the only evidence that liberalism has ever been among us will be the frail memory of something that has gone without our being aware of what has happened. For us then to go on as though we were still entitled to call ourselves liberals is one of the tragic ironies that bedevil human life.

Nobody is safe from this danger—not even a church that can proudly and fairly boast that for a half century it has managed to keep the liberal spirit as its guide and mentor. Indeed, the very passage of as many years as that brings inevitably the probability that the Adversary will shortly begin to use more subtle methods and inaugurate a fresh campaign with unpredictable new weapons. The longer the record of true adherence to the liberal faith, the more imperative the need for unceasing watchfulness, lest the citadel itself be betrayed by foes masquerading as friends. If that

be so, how great is the peril when a tradition of liberalism has lasted for more than a hundred years!

TWO PROTECTIVE DEVICES

HAPPILY, the liberal spirit is not without its allies, both within the fellowship itself and in the world outside. Just as the human body builds up inner resistance to certain forms of disease, so a liberal church develops within itself certain protective devices which warn it of the approach of stagnation. Of these, the most important is the frequent appearance of members of the younger generation who insist upon taking literally the affirmations of devotion to the principles of liberalism which their elders have very likely been repeating by rote. (No such youngster will enjoy being called a "protective device", but after all that is one of the functions he fulfils—and very effectively, too.) Unless the back sliding to stagnation has gone so far that any self-respecting youngster will refuse to show his (or her) face inside the church, there is hope that it can be retarded and stopped by a little judicious encouragement of youthful rebellion. This is why a liberal church which has no young people is in a thoroughly bad way. There may be a chance to save it, by a major operation every few years, but even so the prognosis is bad.

Perhaps it may sound paradoxical to say that another of the protective devices by which a liberal church may be safeguarded is the presence within it of a sufficient number of thoroughly tested and seasoned veterans—men and women no longer in the thick of the fight, "on the retired list" if you like, but with minds more alert than ever to signs of spiritual back sliding among their younger brethren who are now carrying the chief burdens of active responsibility. I remember hearing Professor Peabody speak with disgust of the title "emeritus" which had just been conferred upon him by the university he had served so brilliantly for nearly a lifetime. He had looked up the word in a dictionary and found it defined as "a worn-out, useless old soldier". He did not believe that he had suddenly become worn-out or useless, and he proceeded to prove to the world that he was not! I happen to be one among a great host of younger men who could testify to his ability to detect the earliest hint of back sliding and then do something about it, with a skill that was not impaired by his superb gifts of affectionate friendship.

Every minister knows two or three such valiant souls in his own parish, men and women who grow more truly liberal with every year—more searching and adventurous in mental outlook, more candid in expression, more deeply devoted to justice at home and abroad, more tolerant and

sympathetic. Their influence among us is beyond price. We love them, but we are a little afraid of them also; and both love and fear are good for our souls. While they are with us, back sliding cannot happen.

WATCHMEN WITH TRUMPETS

EVENTS in the world play an equally important part in keeping a liberal church liberal. The challenge of a flagrant act of injustice in the life of the community may awaken at least some members of the church from their dangerous indifference, and the reverberations of their indignation may arouse the whole group. An event halfway round the globe may stir the consciences that have grown dull with disuse. The stars in their courses sometimes fight against stagnation.

What every church needs is a watchman or two, with trumpets. In the prosaic language of modern America, that means a committee on social action. It needn't be a large committee, but it must be well chosen—men and women whose minds are alert and whose hearts are sensitive, who will not be afraid to speak out in meeting. They must be prepared for someone to call them names—cranks, radicals, even Bolsheviks. The more polite members may be content to call them a nuisance, and when this occurs they will do well

to remember that there is such a thing as "nuisance value". Socrates called himself a gadfly, and perhaps the best way is always to call oneself names before the idea occurs to anyone else.

SOCIAL ACTION AND RELIGION

OF course, the full value of a committee on social action goes far beyond this provocative service. The term "social action" can be given wide and deep significance. It may mean much more than the activities we usually associate with it—much more than social service in the narrow sense, or charity, or philanthropy, or welfare programs, or even social reform. It may be used to cover all our activities as members of society, and especially all our efforts to increase good will among men. Social action may become the most important part of our lives, and the most genuinely religious.

Churches can back slide into stagnation, and so can religion—even liberal religion. It can become self-centered, which means extinction. It can stand aloof from the realities of life, which is a form of religious snobbishness. It can degenerate into smugness and die of spiritual anaemia. For these ills, the cure is social action; and the effect of social action is to restore religion to health. The fresh interest in the social application of religion which has recently appeared in the fellowship of

Unitarian churches is a sign of hope and promise. Setting up social relations committees in all our churches, and the organization of such committees on a wider scale—as, for example, in Massachusetts—will do much to keep our Unitarian faith vigorous and free.

F.M.E.

Volume III UNITARIAN HORIZONS Number 3

Published by The Beacon Press on the fifteenth day of each month from September to June inclusive.

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.

FREDERICK M. ELIOT, *President* PARKER E. MAREAN, *Treasurer*

Printed in the U. S. A.